

Snapshots from Life: Using Photo Essays to Enhance the Writing Process in ESOL Literacy Classrooms

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Research question

What is the effect of using digital cameras that can be 'checked out' to take home on students' writing and English ability in an ESOL classroom?

Setting

The Transitional ESOL High School Program (THSP) is a Fairfax County high school program for adults over the age of 18 who are VDOE Level 1 ESOL students. Students take English, math, social studies, and science in the afternoon and evening. They may also take elective classes such as introduction to computers or American Civics. The program's goal is to help students reach Level 2 ESOL proficiency so that they can transfer to an adult or alternative high school and finish earning their diploma. The four sites of the THSP have between 75 and 130 students each. Average class size is approximately 15 students.

Three teachers of ESOL literacy beginners (roughly defined as having had 0 - 3 years of formal education in their native language) applied for and received an Apple Federal Credit Union grant for the 2007-2008 school year. These teachers meet with their students in ninety-minute blocks four evenings a week.

Our project

Our goal was to have our students, many with limited schooling and little experience with technology, create photo essays to foster a unique connection between school and home. We hoped students would make personal connections to their ESOL curriculum by photographing experiences outside of school and writing about them. We also wanted our students to:

- (1) write in an authentic context. Students compiled their photo essays into books for themselves and their classrooms. We wanted students to publish their work to create a literacy-rich learning environment.
- (2) begin to tell stories by discussing, labeling, and writing about their images.
- (3) use their background knowledge to create high-interest texts that were authentic and accessible.
- (4) integrate technology into the writing process.
- (5) use multiple intelligences, e.g, visual, interpersonal, and verbal, in their learning (Gardner).

The Process

The three teachers involved in the grant chose to approach the photo projects in different ways. In all three teachers' classes, students could sign out digital cameras to take photos related to topics being covered in the class. Teachers downloaded the photos from the cameras either directly into a PowerPoint project a student was working on, printed out the photos, or placed the digital photos in a digital class 'photo album' for students to view and choose pictures to describe in writing. In all three teachers' classrooms, students used the photos as a springboard to writing, either by hand or on the computer using PowerPoint. Finished writings were bound into class books and personal books for students, and they were also included in students' portfolios. The books were used for various activities, e.g., silent reading, take-home reading books, partner reading in the classroom, or partner reading with a student from another class.

Data collected and analyzed

- **Products** – Students' writing portfolios were analyzed for voice and for quantity of writing. Writing in students' books was compared to writing samples collected before the digital photo project began.
- **Improvement in Reading and Writing** – Students' performance on county-wide reading and writing assessments was measured at the beginning of the project. More data will be collected after the county's end-of-year ESOL assessments administered in May. Because some students with low literacy skills were unable to be assessed with the county's reading test, anecdotal evidence was also collected to document students' progress.
- **Survey** – Students will be asked to complete a post-project survey to gauge their feelings about taking and writing about photographs, as well as publishing and sharing their work.
- **Researcher memos and e-mails** with observations and reflections by the three teachers involved in the grant
- **Video** of students reading their books to students in another class

Emerging themes:

1. Barriers to using the cameras:
 - a. *Technical issues*

We ran into several technical barriers with this project. They can be divided into two categories: (1) access to hardware and digital storage and (2) ability to use technology.

There were two main access issues. First, we ran into a storage problem. When the first teacher used the cameras and downloaded the files onto a network drive, it quickly ate up all of the space allotted. Several other options were tried, such as printing directly from the cameras, saving photos on the teacher's desktop, and using Picasaweb as an on-line photo storage area. These solutions required different levels of sophistication with technology and were frustrating for the teachers involved. In addition, a great amount of time went into researching different digital storage possibilities. Second, one teacher was frustrated because she could not always get access to the mobile laptop lab for students to work on their projects. In addition, the teachers at the larger site felt that it was challenging to share six cameras among three classes of students.

There were also issues relating to technical expertise. The three teachers involved have different levels of technology skills and different technology comfort levels. One teacher in particular became somewhat frustrated with the amount of tech savvy needed to troubleshoot some problems with the cameras and download the photos. In addition, most students involved in the project do not have computers at home and had minimal prior experience with computers. Therefore, teachers spent a lot of time instructing students about computer basics such as logging in and mousing.

b. *Time (teacher time and class time)*

In addition to time needed to overcome technology glitches, the project itself was time-consuming. Teachers found themselves spending time binding books outside of class, typing work for slow typists, and inserting pictures into PowerPoint. In addition, all of the teachers involved in the project were concerned about the amount of class time that needed to be devoted to writing about the photos. Students required a lot of time to get used to writing on the computer and in some cases learn new software. Most students do not touch type and needed a lot of time to type using a qwerty keyboard. Finally, because our students are adults with extensive responsibilities outside of school, many are frequently absent. Students who were absent often did not have time to complete projects, or teachers had to step in to assist them by typing their work and printing their books for them. Student absences also made it more difficult to plan when to reserve the laptop cart for students to work on their photo books.

c. *Students who don't want to photograph their lives outside of school.*


Some students were unwilling to borrow a camera to take pictures. The teachers speculated that this reluctance was due to students'

immigration status. Another reason might be that students do not like their jobs or homes or could not photograph their friends and families in their home countries.

2. Voice & quantity of writing:

In one teacher's class, all the students had access to all photos taken by means of an on-line digital photo album. She noticed that some students chose to write about their own photos, while other students decided to write about photos that other students had taken. It was particularly interesting to note the difference in voice between students who wrote about their own photos and those who did not. For example:

no good today.
maybe tomorrow
is snowy and school
closed. And work.




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student writing about
own photo

The weather

The tree has snow. it
is cold.



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student writing about
classmate's photo

However, only one teacher noticed this increase in voice when students wrote about their own photos.

3. Effect of student choice:

- a.** Ideas teachers would not have envisioned
Students' choices of what to photograph enriched classroom discussions and activities. In a unit on food, for example, one student chose to photograph the wordless instructions on how to make certain foods they use in the restaurant where she works. Other photos led to discussions and whole-class language experience activities. Here are one teacher's observations:

With the food books, I told them that they could take pictures of anything having to do with food....cooking, eating, going to a restaurant. Then Carlos mentioned the idea of the supermarket, and lots of students ended up taking pictures of food at a grocery store. That wasn't exactly what I had had in mind, but some of the pictures were really stunning, and they led to discussions like, "Oh yes, I love bread with hot chocolate." . . . One student, Maria Estela, had pictures of her and her husband in a restaurant, and later, Miriam came in with videos of her family eating at a restaurant. . . One student, Silvia, took pictures of herself making pupusas, which sparked our pupusa cooking experience later.

Allowing for choice with the photographs shifted the focus of students' writings and even the class. One example of this shift occurred in photographing class activities. In previous years, one teacher photographed students making hot cocoa and baked apples, focusing primarily on the steps of the process. This year, students took the photos, focusing more on people than activities. For the first time, the teacher emerged as a participant in the activity instead of just the recorder.

- b.** Some photos were really stunning.
Teachers were surprised and excited by the quality of some of the photographs. Students often chose these beautiful photographs to write about, even if they were not their own.

Some favorite photos



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- c. Some students didn't know what to photograph.
There was a least one example of a student who returned a camera without taking photos because he did not know what to photograph.

4. Quantity:

Students seemed to write more when describing the photos than they had previously when asked to (1) draw a picture and write about a topic or (2) write about a topic with sentence starters and find supporting clip art. For example, one student who typically wrote one or two sentences for a given writing assignment started writing three or more sentences per picture for books consisting of a least four pictures. However, could this be attributed to the increased time allotted to the photo book project?

In one teacher's class, some students took pictures at their jobs. One student was so excited about this assignment that he took close to 20 pictures. When he saw his photos, he had so much to say that he began writing furiously in Spanish. Although he is one of the stronger students in the class, it appeared that he simply felt too limited by his English to describe the photos to his satisfaction. He then asked to take the pages home so that he could translate his ideas into English. When it was time to type his work, he forgot his drafts at home, so he composed everything directly on the computer. Composing his ideas in his native language seemed to help the student generate ideas in English because his descriptions of the photos were much lengthier than those composed by students who did not have photo prompts. The following examples illustrate this difference in quantity:

My Job and Location

I am a master cook. My job is at Ruby Tuesday. It is on Eisenhower Avenue in Alexandria, VA.

Every morning I go to my job on the bus and metro train. I work Tuesday to Saturday 9.00 am to 5.00 pm. Ruby Tuesday is restaurant for the dinner American. (Hamburger, chicken tenders, chicken wings, french fried etc.)



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student writing about own photos

Job Title and Location

I am a babysitter. I work at day care. My job is located in Springfield.



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student writing with clip art illustrations

5. Expanding the use of photos beyond the original book idea:

- a. One teacher began to have students talk about their photos while they were displayed with the LCD projector. This “mini presentation” served as a pre-writing activity, helping students generate ideas before they began composing on paper. This activity also allowed students in the class to ask questions, thereby giving the presenter additional ideas for writing. Furthermore, the presentations sparked interesting class discussions about topics

such as breads in different countries and also provided reluctant photographers with ideas for pictures.

- b.** We also had students use the cameras in class to document classroom activities. In the past, teachers used the school's digital camera to take photos of class activities so that the students could use them for writing and retelling activities. However, now that the class had multiple cameras, the job of photographing class activities was turned over to students, adding an element of student choice to these types of photographs. For example, learning became more student-centered when students took pictures of their classmates making fruit salad, baked apples, and hot cocoa.
- c.** Students also took photographs during field trips to the public library and to Career Night. These photos then served as springboards for discussion and writing the day after the events. After the library field trip, for example, students compiled their photos and writings into a collaborative thank you note for the librarian.
- d.** One teacher expanded the project by having students read the books they created to a partner in another class. She found this highly motivating for the students, and they spent a lot of time practicing to read for their partner.

Ideas for next steps:

1. Expand on the uses for the photo books:

- a.** One teacher paired students with a partner in another class and had them read their books together. This seemed to be extremely motivating and would be an idea to expand to other classes. It might also be interesting to have Annandale and Lee students share their work with each other.
- b.** Start book bags next year with student-created books as take-home books. One teacher had success this year with take-home book bags, similar to those used in elementary school classes.
- c.** Add to the listening center by having students make MP3 files of themselves reading their books for others to hear.
- d.** Display photos and writings in a central place such as the Transitional ESOL High School bulletin board in Devonshire.

2. Other types of projects. Other types of projects with digital photos have the potential to increase student interest and motivation and also lessen the time and technology stress present in making books. Some ideas include:
- a. Digital stories using Photostory or similar software - Digital stories are potentially more accessible for emergent readers since they can see text and listen to words at the same time. They also give students opportunities for speaking as well as writing.
 - b. Photo collages and posters - Both photo collages and posters are activities that allow students to use their photos by printing them out and creating art with them. For example, students could create a scrapbook with their photos. These projects are less technically demanding than creating photo books to be printed out in PowerPoint or creating digital stories. They also provide some variety in the use of the photos and allow visual students a chance to express themselves while also incorporating their knowledge of English into their projects.
 - c. Class discussions/ presentations based on photos - One teacher started projecting students' photos and using them for short student presentations and class discussions. This may also be less technically demanding and provides an opportunity to practice speaking English. It can also serve as a pre-writing activity.
 - d. Photos and writings could also be compiled into a class newspaper or literary magazine.

Further questions:

1. Is writing about photographs the students have taken more effective with students of a lower ESOL proficiency or less background knowledge/ education?
2. Would the time factor be less of an issue with more proficient students?
3. Can photos be used to help generate student writing in different genres?